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Title

Darkness seemed to engulf them, like the blanket of a star-less night sky. Its embrace seemed to stretch over every inch of the wooden slave ship. From her deep and creaking bellows, to the small metal grates that separated the captured from their captors. Hundreds of blacks rattled in their chains, fruitlessly attempting to break free from their harsh grip. Chains that both physically held them to the ship’s floor and inspired them to find strength within themselves to hang onto that last ounce of life. In everyone’s life whether through hardships or daily routines they all have one particular person or item that inspires them to make it through the day, reminds them of a loved one, or is something so precious that it’s priceless. They dream of passing these items on to their future generations or sharing their story with others, so that their inspirational and guiding light may touch and help a loved one or friend. From collectible souvenirs to intangible ideas everyone’s family heirlooms or legends are all the same in that they intend to keep them in the family forever, and hope that their powerful story will never be lost on future generations. They are united in that their special heroes or items are worth much more to them then what they are on the outside. For them their face value does not determine their worth. To the Lewis family, Muhammad’s slave shackles are just that kind of family heirloom that has been motivating generations of young African Americans. The slave shackles, in the novel The Glory Field by Walter Dean Myers, inspire Muhammad to hang on to his last ounce of life, empower Tommy to stand up for African American rights, and remind Malcolm of his ancestors and the challenges they had to overcome to truly call themselves Lewises.

For Muhammad the slave shackles mean much more than a way to chain him prisoner to his destiny, but instead the shackles themselves and the promise of slavery that they carry, are what inspire Muhammad to overcome the many tribulations he faces both during and after his trip to Live Oaks. As the days rolled by, the large wooden vessel continued to rock back and forth on the treacherous sea, and Muhammad Bilal rocked with it. After a month, his only thoughts were to continue breathing, to try and endure the sweltering heat, and ignore the soreness that came from being chained to the deck of a ship, “He fought against death from breath to breath, trying always to fill his lungs for the next minute of life, trying to ease the pain of the shackles around his legs, trying to think forward to an ending of his torment, trying to think of being free again” (9). Though at this moment, Muhammad doesn’t realize the importance of the slave shackles, it’s their purpose, holding him prisoner on the ship, which fuels his great determination to resist weakness and ultimately death. And later at Live Oaks, it’s the slave shackles, and what they remind him of: the trials he’s recently overcome under the horrendous conditions of the slave ship, that motivate him to wake up every morning and declare, “I am a man!”. With memories of his bravery while wearing the shackles still fresh in his mind Muhammad saves them to pass down through the Lewis family for generations to come, as a symbol of new a course of destiny he has chartered for both himself and his family. It is with Muhammad that the slave shackles gain their meaning. As the shackles are passed down through the generations, it is the memory of him that appears in the minds of the receivers, the memory of the confidence, bravery, and the sense of resilience Muhammad brought to the Lewis name while wearing them.

Though apprehensive at first, Tommy was able to stand up for a cause he believed in: African American right, with a little inspiration from Muhammad and his slave shackles. Fearful for his future and of losing his scholarship, Tommy chooses not to participate in Reverend McKinnon’s rally. As he accidently stumbles into a group of white protestors he’s angered by their behavior, and decides that it’s time to stand up against segregation even if it may mean risking his scholarship. Tommy decides to take action at the press conference, “Sheriff Moser was looking at the lock and desperately banging it against the table to try to get it open. The chain was old, but it held as it had two hundred years earlier. Through all the banging and twisting of Sheriff Moser’s keys in the lock, it held as Tommy hoped it would”. “’Where are the keys to this thing, boy?”’ Sheriff Moser’s face was twisted with anger. “’They didn’t give us the keys.”’ Tommy answered. “’Just the chains”’(233). Tommy overcomes his fears, and drawing inspiration from Muhammad uses the chains to again prove the resilience and strength of the Lewis family through his protest. Never does he abandon something he feels is important. Though slavery is over, Tommy is fighting his own battle against segregation. In order to win he pulls strength he didn’t know he had from both his family and the priceless heirlooms they let him to remember them by. Remember he did, and it was those memories of the misery faced by blacks everywhere who were once held by those very same chains that gave him the drive he needed to make his voice heard. Without Muhammad’s shackles and the painful, yet inspirational memories they carry, Tommy would never have been able to pull off such a moving and attention grabbing demonstration while showcasing the courage it takes to be a Lewis.

Finally, the shackles leave Malcolm with a meaningful and loving memory of not only Planter, but all of his Lewis ancestors, and give him a deeper appreciation for what they had to overcome for him to truly call himself a free African American. As the days after Planter’s funeral drag on, Malcolm is busy touring the college circuit with his band. But, the memory of Planter still nags at the back of Malcolm’s mind as he looks for closure regarding his newly found friend’s death. The special package Planter leaves for his granddaughter to one day give to Malcolm provides all the closure he could ever hope for. He recalls the memorable day when he first saw the shackles, “They had been passed down from generation to generation, and now Planter had entrusted them to him…he lifted the shackles, felt their weight, ran his fingers along the smoothness of the well-worn iron. He had even thought about putting them around his ankles, but knew that it would never be the same. It wasn’t his to experience, only his to know about, to imagine how hard it had been. The weight of the shackles gave substance to all the people who had worn them, and who had triumphed in spite of them”(307). Malcolm knows he will never be able to know what wearing the shackles really felt like, but knows that Planter left them so that he could always remember what they once met. They serve as a reminder of the many brave Lewis family members who came before him. Whether they wore the shackles, or used them to achieve something great, every Lewis endured their own set of struggles so that Malcolm could live freely and without discrimination in the world he so takes for granted. For Malcolm, the slave shackles are a celebration of his rights as a free African American and a token of remembrance from a family that risked everything for him and all future generations of Lewises after him.